

87 QUOTATIONS



Martin Luther King, Jr.

(1929-1968)

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. is an icon of social justice, the greatest American civil rights leader of the 20th century, as Frederick Douglass was in the 19th. With courage, a resonant mellow voice and a poetic talent for metaphor, King became one of the most inspirational speakers in history. He was a master of black pulpit oratory and spoke with a musical passion and power, visibly controlling his emotions, using abundant repetition and recurrent rhythms in building to crescendos—in the spirit of a gospel singer. His “I Have a Dream” speech at the Washington Memorial in 1963, overlooking the mall packed with 200-300,000 people, is a landmark in American history. The march and his speech are credited with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King ardently preached the traditional ideal of the American “melting pot” later rejected by black leaders and advocates of other interest groups. Many people, and even King himself, anticipated that he would be martyred. The most tragic aspect of his assassination is that it worked: After that, politicians and Postmodern academics did the opposite of what King had preached. Instead of judging students by the “content of their character” educators and even the government began judging people by skin color, gender, class, sexual orientation, and beliefs—by Political Correctness. They institutionalized the prejudice that King tried to overcome.

ORDER OF TOPICS: education, war, leadership, obligation to speak out, brotherhood, nonviolent protest, peace, law and order, race, violence, hate, revenge, fear and guilt, integration, character, human nature, virtues, Postmodernism, Communism, infinite hope, from “I Have a Dream” (1963), death.

EDUCATION

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.

Science investigates, religion interprets.

Life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites.

You don't have to have a college degree to serve.

WAR

War is a poor chisel to carve out tomorrow.

We have guided missiles and misguided men.

Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power.

We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.

LEADERSHIP

A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.

OBLIGATION TO SPEAK OUT

A right delayed is a right denied.

The time is always right to do what is right.

There comes a time when silence is betrayal.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

The calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.

Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

We must learn that passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby to become a participant in its evil.

BROTHERHOOD

We have flown the air like birds and swum the sea like fishes, but have yet to learn the simple act of walking the earth like brothers.

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.

NONVIOLENT PROTEST

We shall overcome.

One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

The means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.

Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.

I submit that an individual who breaks the law that conscience tells him is unjust and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

We who engage in nonviolent action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.

There is nothing more majestic than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom and dignity.

Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

Until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

PEACE

True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.

Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

LAW AND ORDER

It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me.

Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless.

Law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.

Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal.

RACE

A man can't ride your back unless it's bent.

It is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.

Discrimination is a hellhound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives to remind them that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as truth in the society dominating them.

The sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

VIOLENCE

A riot is the language of the unheard.

The limitation of riots, moral questions aside, is that they cannot win and their participants know it. Hence, rioting is not revolutionary but reactionary because it invites defeat. It involves an emotional catharsis, but it must be followed by a sense of futility.

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.

HATE

Hate cannot drive out hate.

Let no man pull you so low as to hate him.

Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness.

Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity.

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

REVENGE

That old law about "an eye for an eye" leaves everybody blind.

FEAR AND GUILT

The Negro needs the white man to free him from his fears. The white man needs the Negro to free him from his guilt.

INTEGRATION

I want to be the white man's brother, not his brother-in-law.

We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.

All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

CHARACTER

Unearned suffering is redemptive.

Lightning makes no sound until it strikes.

If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.

There is nothing more tragic than to find an individual bogged down in the length of life, devoid of breadth.

HUMAN NATURE

There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.

VIRTUES

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.

Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude.

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?"

All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.

A man should do his job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better.

POSTMODERNISM

The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.

The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually.

We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practices of paganism.

A nation or civilization that continues to produce soft-minded men purchases its own spiritual death on the installment plan.

There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that they have nothing to lose. People who have stake in their society, protect that society, but when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it.

COMMUNISM

Communism forgets that life is individual. Capitalism forgets that life is social, and the Kingdom of Brotherhood is found neither in the thesis of Communism nor the antithesis of Capitalism but in a higher synthesis.

INFINITE HOPE

All reality has spiritual control.

Only in the darkness can you see the stars.

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

This faith transforms the whirlwind of despair into a warm and reviving breeze of hope.

Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.

Occasionally in life there are these moments of unutterable fulfillment which cannot be completely explained by those symbols called words. Their meanings can only be articulated by the inaudible language of the heart.

from "I Have A Dream" (1963)

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where *they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.* [italics added]

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty we are free at last!"

DEATH

I guess one of the great agonies of life is that we are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable.

The end of life is not to be happy, nor to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, but to do the will of God, come what may.

Like anybody, I would like to have a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.

I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man.

If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.

The cross is something that you bear, and ultimately, that you die on.

It does not matter how long you live, but how well you do it.

